Vatican admits Galileo was right

Galileo before the Holy Office

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In 1633, the Inquisition of the Roman Catholic Church forced Galileo Galilei, one of the founders of modern science, to recant his theory that the Earth moves around the Sun. Under threat of torture, Galileo – seen facing his inquisitors – recanted. But as he left the courtroom, he is said to have muttered, ‘all the same, it moves’.

Last week, 359 years later, the Church finally agreed. At a ceremony in Rome, before the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, Pope John Paul II officially declared that Galileo was right. The formal rehabilitation was based on the findings of a committee of the Academy the Pope set up in 1979, soon after taking office. The committee decided the Inquisition had acted in good faith, but was wrong.

In fact, the Inquisition’s verdict was uncannily similar to cautious statements by modern officialdom on more recent scientific conclusions, such as predictions about greenhouse warming. The Inquisition ruled that Galileo could not prove ‘beyond doubt’ that the Earth orbits the Sun, so they could not reinterpret scriptures implying otherwise.

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The verdict was not one to which the doctrine of papal infallibility applied, and the Vatican was never comfortable with it. Pope Urban approved it, but commuted Galileo's sentence from prison to house arrest. The Church finally admitted he was right in the 19th century.

But the Galileo affair still embarrassed the Church, which now maintains an astronomical observatory at the Pope's summer palace at Castelgandolfo. Father George Coine, who heads the observatory, says the affair was 'tragic, beyond the control of any one party'. It was the height of the Church's battle with Protestantism, says Coine, 'and here was a scientist saying he interpreted scripture better than they did.'

The trials were not a confrontation between science and faith, says Coine, because 'Galileo never presented his science to the Inquisition. Science wasn't even at the trial'.

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